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# Compensation Strategies: Tracking Movement in EFL Learners' Speaking Skills<sup>1</sup>

Estrategias de Compensación: Seguimiento al Nivel  
de Avance de la Expresión Oral de los Estudiantes de  
Inglés como Lengua Extranjera

**Alireza Karbalaee and Tania Negin Taji<sup>2\*</sup>**  
*Farhangian University, Kish International Branch,  
Islamic Azad University, Kish, Iran*

## Abstract

The present study aimed to determine the compensation strategies used by Iranian elementary EFL learners across the speaking skill. The participants of this study were a sample of 120 EFL elementary male and female learners whose ages ranged between 11 and 25 at a language institute in Rostam, Iran. The main participants were homogenized through the Standardized Key English Test (KET). After the administration of the proficiency test, some oral exams consisting of different speaking topics were administered in the first and following sessions of the course with the purpose of observing and identifying the compensation strategies used by the EFL learners with the same proficiency level. Oxford's typology of compensation strategies was prepared in form of a checklist to facilitate fast recording of observable compensation strategies in an oral exams. The students' speaking on the given topics merely served as an opportunity to observe students' use of compensation strategies. The results indicated that Iranian EFL students tended to use various kinds of compensation strategies in communicating their intended meanings.

**Keywords:** Communicative competence, strategic competence, compensation strategies, language learning strategies

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<sup>2</sup> [alireza\\_karbalaee\\_2007@yahoo.com](mailto:alireza_karbalaee_2007@yahoo.com) , [tarane.negin@yahoo.com](mailto:tarane.negin@yahoo.com)

### Resumen

El presente artículo intenta determinar las estrategias de compensación utilizadas por los estudiantes iraníes de primaria a través de la expresión oral. La población objetivo del estudio fueron 120 estudiantes (hombres y mujeres) de primaria, cuyas edades oscilaban entre los 11 y los 25 años, en un instituto de inglés en Rostam, Irán. Se aplicó el examen estandarizado de inglés KET para homogenizar la muestra. Después de la administración del examen de competencia, algunos exámenes orales consistían en diferentes temas de lengua, los cuales fueron administrados en la primera y en las siguientes sesiones del curso con el propósito de observar e identificar las estrategias de compensación usadas por los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera con el mismo nivel de competencia. Se utilizaron estrategias de compensación correspondientes a la tipología Oxford para el diseño de la lista de control, en aras de facilitar la rápida grabación de estrategias de compensación observadas en el examen oral. Los temas asignados a los estudiantes para el examen oral sirvieron simplemente como una oportunidad para observar las estrategias de compensación usadas por los estudiantes. Los resultados indicaron que los estudiantes iraníes tienden a usar varios tipos de estrategias de compensación para comunicar el significado exacto de lo que pretenden transmitir.

*Palabras clave:* Competencia comunicativa, competencia estratégica, estrategias de compensación, estrategias de aprendizaje de una lengua

### Resumo

O presente artigo tenta determinar as estratégias de compensação utilizadas pelos estudantes iranianos de ensino fundamental (de 1ª a 5ª série) através da expressão oral. A população objetivo do estudo foram 120 estudantes (homens e mulheres) de ensino fundamental (de 1ª a 5ª série), cujas idades variavam entre os 11 e os 25 anos, em um instituto de inglês em Rostam, Irã. Aplicou-se a prova padronizada de inglês KET para homogeneizar a amostra. Depois da aplicação da prova de competência, algumas provas orais consistiam em diferentes temas de língua, os quais foram aplicados no ensino fundamental (de 1ª a 5ª série) e nas seguintes sessões do curso com o propósito de observar e identificar as estratégias de compensação usadas pelos estudantes de inglês como língua estrangeira com o mesmo nível de competência. Utilizaram-se estratégias de compensação correspondentes à tipologia Oxford para o desenho da lista de chamada, em prol de facilitar a rápida gravação de estratégias de compensação observadas na prova oral. Os temas designados aos estudantes para a prova oral serviram simplesmente como uma oportunidade para observar as estratégias de compensação usadas pelos estudantes. Os resultados indicaram que os estudantes iranianos tendem a usar vários tipos de estratégias de compensação para comunicar o significado exato do que pretendem transmitir.

*Palavras chave:* Competência comunicativa, competência estratégica, estratégias de compensação, estratégias de aprendizagem de uma língua

### Introduction

Much attention has been focused on learning strategies since the late 1970s, and the investigation in the domain of language learning strategies has increased our comprehension of the processes learners apply to advance their competency in a second or foreign language. Reiss (1985) states that within the past decade, attention on the research of foreign language had changed from the teacher to the student, and pedagogical studies had clarified a number of criteria that justify some of the diversities in how learners learn. Nevertheless, Harlow (1988) insists that although the instructional process involves both teacher and learner, much of the research on instruction has concentrated upon techniques of teaching, while ignoring the prominence of learner himself. As Rubin (1975) discusses, many foreign language teachers are so concerned with detecting the best method or with getting the accurate reply that they fail to attend to the process of learning.

As such, instructors can have an active and noteworthy role, which can promote the work of language teachers. Additionally, O'Malley et al. (1985) also recommend that good language learners' strategies, once clarified and successfully instructed to learners of lower competency, could have notable effect for increasing the improvement of second language skills. Keeping these facts in mind, we would like to recommend that if language instructors recognized more about what the successful students did, we might be capable of teaching these strategies to learners with poorer competency to promote their success. Thus, the idea proposed in this paper was that "an understanding and awareness of learning strategies on the part of teachers as well as students may provide valuable insights into the process of language learning" (Fleming & Walls, as cited in Karbalaee, 2013).

A major research area in second language acquisition is the clarification and explanation of learning strategies applied by language students and the relationship of these strategies with other student variables such as motivation, gender, age, proficiency level, and the like (Chamot & El- Dinary, 1999; El-Dib, 2004; Green & Oxford, 1995). Contemporary research is also studying the impact of the task itself on the choice and application of learning strategies, such as the effect of the target language (Chamot & Keatley, 2004; Oxford, Cho, Leung & Kim, 2004).

Communication strategies are "techniques of coping with difficulties in communicating in an imperfectly known second language" (Stern, 1983, p. 411). Three characteristics associated by

many with such strategies are that they are problem-based (used when communication problems arise), conscious and intentional. Tarone's (1977) typology of communication strategies was an influential and early one, subsequent important ones including Faerch and Kasper's (1983) and Bialystok's (1990). Most studies have been concerned with lexical strategies, and various have attempted to relate communication strategy use to variables such as learner proficiency, task type and learner personality, while there have been attempts (notably in Bialystok, 1990) to draw parallels with the use of L1 strategies, particularly by children. A few writers have considered the role communication strategies play in the learning process, but clear conclusions are not yet available. There are also differences of opinion as to the value of training of learners in strategy use.

It is possible to observe that many Iranian learners have study habits that discourage their target language learning. In fact, they are often incapable of dealing with failure in interaction and other language skills as reading and writing because of their restricted linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge in the area of the target language. Commonly, they use compensation strategies, which enhance their accomplishment. For example, students simply refrain from conversation or topics for which they have no adequate vocabulary knowledge; they switch to their first language or ask for help (Moattarian & Tahririan, 2013; Pazhakh, 2007; Tajeddin & Alemi, 2010; Zarei & Elekaei, 2013;).

An overview over of the related literature reveals that, in spite of its undeniable importance, the concept of CSs has been considered as just one factor of Oxford's Strategy Inventory Language Learning (SILL). However, the basic aim of this inventory is supporting all language leaning strategy (LLS) use of a special group of FL/ESL learners. Accordingly, the study of compensation strategies has been limited to the superficial review of these strategies in the wider skeleton of LLS. Moreover, many of these studies have attempted to find a relationship between proficiency levels and LLSs, therefore leaving the other major issues neglected, such as the application of CS to other language skills.

The use of special compensation strategies may be grounded in culture. However, apart from that, it is crucial for learners to apply the strategies that assist them in conserving the conversation, to better comprehend the target language, to deal with vocabulary and grammar shortcomings, or to obtain a higher score. Besides, when learners experience favorable communication in the target language in spite of their lack of knowledge, their self-confidence improves and

this encourages them to achieve more active involvement in language learning tasks. Based on this problem, the present research attempted to answer the following main questions: *What are the compensation strategies used by Iranian elementary EFL learners across the speaking skills, and Is there any significant difference between male and female Iranian elementary EFL learners across the speaking skill?*

### Literature Review

There is a large bulk of research investigating language learning strategies, and compensation strategies as a subcategory of it, both in Iran and in other educational contexts (Rahimi et al., 2008; Tajeddin & Alemi, 2010). The majority of these studies have employed Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). Compensation strategies, which have gained status in the wider language learning strategies framework, are investigated from different viewpoints, mainly their frequency of use, and their relationship with proficiency level, gender, learners' beliefs and learning style.

Hong-Nam and Leavell (2006) perused the use of language learning strategy of 55 ESL learners with various linguistic and cultural backgrounds in an intensive English learning context. They observed that there was a curvilinear connection between English proficiency and strategy use; that is, there was more use of learning strategies among intermediate learners than beginning and advanced students.

In a more recent study, Fewell (2010) examined the use of language learning strategy (LLS) by Japanese college EFL students with different proficiency levels. The results of his study indicated that although the overall average of the SILL scores were approximately even, the learners in the low proficiency group used social and compensation LLS to a higher degree.

Tajeddin and Alemi's study (2010), as one the studies specifically focused on compensation strategies, addressed high and low proficient students' preferences for two compensation strategies: compensating and guessing the missing knowledge and the sources of them. The authors concluded that "there is progression from L1- and avoidance-based strategies to L2-based and guessing strategies. This arises from proficient learners' movement beyond the threshold level to capitalize on linguistic clues to more guesses and to use general L2-based resources to compensate for deficiency in a particular area" (p. 52).

Similarly, Zarei and Elekaei (2013) investigated the effect of attitude on the choice of compensation and meta-cognitive strategies of

Iranian EFL university students. The results indicated that unlike meta-cognitive strategies, the level of attitude had a statistically significant effect on the choice of students' compensation strategies ( $F = 19.407$ ).

Margolis (2001) tried to prepare an empirical foundation of learner strategies to compensate for missing knowledge or deficiencies in listening and speaking ability. These outcomes reveal that learners most often use the strategy of getting help by asking for more information or confirmation compared to the other strategies. The second most utilized strategy was making guesses. A range of other strategies including coining words, synonyms and antonyms, using gestures and mime, etc., were the least observed strategies.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The design used in this study was of descriptive nature because the researcher only considered the qualitative data.

### **Context and Participants**

The participants were Iranian EFL language learners. In fact, a total number of 120 students were distributed in eight intact general English classes, four classes of male participants and four classes of female participants. In fact, 15 learners attended each class and they were male and female learners within 11-25 age span. The male learners attended on odd days and the female ones attended on even days. They were placed in the elementary level according to the KET proficiency test conducted prior to the main study in order to homogenize the participants. The classes were taught by two female teachers, the present researcher and one of her female colleagues, and two other male teachers with at least five years experience in language teaching. The materials used were based on the topics covered in the relevant books within a period of four weeks during which eight sessions were managed.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

Oxford's typology of compensation strategies was prepared in the form of a checklist to facilitate quick recording of observable CSs in an oral exams. The students' speaking on the given topics merely served as an opportunity to observe students' compensation strategies

use (Margolis, 2001). The students were not informed about the aim of speaking on the topics and consider them as a kind of placement or achievement test since they were administered at the beginning as well as during the course.

Identifying CS is difficult; however, the criteria proposed by Bhaskaran (as cited in Khanji, 1996), first used for identifying compensation strategies employed by Jordanian EFL learners and later adopted by other researchers, can be utilized to identify the CS that learners use in listening and speaking. The typology of compensation strategies proposed by Oxford (1990) is the main instrument used in this study. The purpose for selecting this framework is that it is one of the few instruments, and of course the one most frequently one, proposed to address CS. Additionally, it involves the CS in all basic language skills because Oxford (1990) believed that compensation happens not only in comprehension of the new language but also in producing it. This typology is divided into two broad categories: a) guessing in listening and reading, and b) overcoming restrictions in speaking and writing. Together, these comprise 10 compensation strategies across four basic language skills. It is worth mentioning that this study focused only on the second category since we were going to peruse the compensation strategies across the speaking skill. As such, the framework used is made up of eight compensation strategies across the speaking skill.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

For the purpose of the study, a placement test, KET, was administered and we made sure about the same proficiency level of the learners. In the second phase the Oxford's typology of compensation strategies was prepared in form of a checklist to facilitate fast recording of observable CSs in oral exams. The ideas on the given topics merely serve as an opportunity to observe students' use of compensation strategies (Margolis, 2001). The students were not informed about the aim of these exams and considered them as kinds of placement or achievement test since they were administered at the beginning of the course.

94

Before the beginning of the course, the teachers were instructed how to use the checklists. In the case of unpredicted strategies not included in the checklist, the teachers were asked to write down the strategy and the number of times that students employed it. In the third phase, some oral exams consisting of different speaking topics were administered in the first and the following sessions of the course with the purpose of observing and identifying the compensation strategies

used by learners with the same proficiency level. Students were required to share their ideas on a topic in line with their regular course books and typical class sessions. For example, one of the topics was about *traveling alone or with a group of friends*. Another topic was about *studying alone or with a group of students*. All of the participants received the same topic every session. A total number of eight topics were provided for the participants during the experiment.

It is possible to illustrate some compensation strategies used by the participants on the following topic as an example: *Some people think that they can learn better by themselves than with a teacher. Others think that it is always better to have a teacher. Which one do you prefer? Why?*

1. Switching to the mother tongue participant 1:

I think *both* (in Farsi) teacher and (in Farsi) students are important (in Farsi).

In this example the learner did not know the words *both* and *and* in English and she switched to her mother tongue and told the words in Farsi.

2. Using mime or gesture by participant 2:

When I have questions in my *mind* (pointing to her head), I can ask my questions from my teacher.

In this example, the learner did not know the word *mind* in English, so she pointed to her head to convey her meaning without speaking Farsi.

3. Using a circumlocution or synonym by participant 3:

Teachers come to your home and get more money are better for students and they learn fast.

In this example, the learner was trying to refer to tutors by providing easy definition and circumlocution of the word.

4. Coining words by participants 4:

I had a personal teacher and he helped me pass last term.

Like the last example, in this one the learner was trying to refer to a tutor by providing easy definition and making a new equivalent for the word.



Finally, learners' oral speech was tape-recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed. After listening to these recordings, learners' oral descriptions and ideas of topics were identified, marked and labeled on the CSs. Each utterance presented by the students, whether short, long, or silent was transcribed and identified.

### Results

The data obtained by the checklists from the instructors were subjected to various statistical analyses. To answer the question, descriptive and inferential statistics was utilized to calculate the frequency and percentage of total CS used by the Iranian EFL Learners. A total number of 1080 examples of compensatory strategies were clarified in the process of data collection over the eight introduced topics during the task of speaking topics (See Table 1).

*Table 1. Case processing summary*

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Gender * Strategy	1080	100.0%	0	.0%	1080	100.0%

Beginning with the most frequently used kind of strategies the frequency of these strategies is shown in Table 2 in order to answer the question of the study, what are the compensation strategies used by Iranian elementary EFL learners across the speaking skill?

*Table 2. Frequency of the strategies used by all participants*

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Switching to the mother tongue	254	23.51%
Using a circumlocution or synonym	184	17.03 %
Avoiding communication partially or totally	168	15.55 %
Adjusting or approximating the message	145	13.42 %
Getting help	123	11.38 %
Coining words	99	9.16 %
Selecting the topic	73	6.75%
Using mime or gesture	34	3.14%
<b>N</b>	<b>1080</b>	<b>100%</b>

As it is clear from the above table, Iranian elementary EFL learners used different kinds of compensation strategies across the speaking skill.

The most widely used strategies included switching to the mother tongue (23.51%), using a circumlocution or synonym (17.03%), avoiding communication partially or totally (15.55%), and adjusting or approximating the message (13.42%). At least one of the above communication strategies was applied by all of the learners. The least utilized strategies included getting help (11.388%), coining words (9.166%), selecting the topic (6.759%), and using mime or gesture (3.148%).

In order to show the differences between the preferences of male and female participants in using these strategies, data were analyzed as shown in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. Chi-Square Tests

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	33.380	7	.000

As shown in Table 4, there is a statistically significant difference between male and female in using compensation strategies.

Table 4. Frequency of the strategies used by all participants

	Strategy								Total
	Switching to the mother tongue	Using a circumlocution or synonym	Avoiding communication partially or totally	Adjusting or approximating the message	Getting help	Coining words	Selecting the topic	Using mime or gesture	
Males	147	76	94	59	81	61	41	19	578
Females	107	108	74	86	42	38	32	15	502
Total	254	184	168	145	123	99	73	34	1080

The results indicated that the males tended to use some of these strategies more frequently than others compared to the female participants; on the other hand, females used the others more frequently than males. In the case of the first strategy, switching to the mother tongue, the female participants used it 147 times whereas the females ones used it 107 times, concluding that the males were more interested in using this strategy. Regarding the second strategy, using a circumlocution or synonym, female students used it in 107 different examples, but the

males used it in 76 different examples, concluding that the female learners were more interested than males in using this strategy. As far as the third strategy is concerned, avoiding communication partially or totally, 94 examples were gathered in which the male participants utilized this strategy whereas the female learners used it in only 74 examples, showing that the males were more willing to apply this strategy than the females. In the case of the forth strategy, adjusting or approximating the message, the female participants showed greater interest in using this strategy, 86 times, but the male learners utilized it in producing 59 sentences. With regard to the fifth strategy, getting help, the male students had a greater tendency and used it 81 times, but the female learners used it only 42 times. Concerning the sixth strategy, coining words, the male participants showed to be more willing again and produced 61 sentences using this strategy. The female participants used this strategy 38 times, which indicates that they are not interested in applying this strategy as much as the males. In the case of the seventh strategy, selecting the topic, 41 examples were recorded for the male learners, but 32 ones were recorded for the female learners. Finally, in the case of the eighth strategy, using mime or gesture, 19 examples were recorded for the male learners, but 15 ones were recorded for the female learners. To sum up, we can claim that the male learners were more interested in using these kinds of compensation strategies by using them 578 times than the female leaners who used the compensation strategies 502 times.

Based on the descriptive and statistical analyses of the data presented, the following results have been found. Iranian EFL students tended to use various kinds of CS in communicating their intended meanings. They widely depended on switching to the mother tongue. This demonstrates that the participants of the study were eager to communicate in English rather than avoiding it. Elementary male students used more CS than elementary female students. This could mean that male participants were more enthusiastic and more interested in carrying out communication than female students. Elementary male students depended more than female students on switching to the mother tongue, avoiding communication partially or totally, getting help, coining words, selecting the topic, and using mime or gesture in getting their ideas across. They tended to use similar words and phrases, and get round the items and forms more than the female students. Elementary female students depended more than elementary male students on using a circumlocution or synonym and adjusting or approximating the message in getting their ideas across. Elementary female students used more circumlocution or synonym than did elementary male students.

This could mean that elementary female students had more linguistic resources than did elementary male students. It was also found that students who tended to use more switching to the mother tongue in their communication, tended to use less mime or gesture. Students who employed more switching to the mother tongue in their communication, tended to use more CS.

### Conclusions

Many learners have problems in expressing their communicative purposes. This is as an outcome of the gaps in their linguistic knowledge. If learners are capable of anticipating difficulties in interaction or when they face one, they often seek for alternative ways to get their meaning conveyed. These alternative ways such as switching to the mother tongue, using a circumlocution or synonym, avoiding communication partially or totally, adjusting or approximating the message, getting help, coining words, selecting the topic, and using mime or gesture are generally referred to as learners' compensation strategies.

The knowledge of all the issues discussed so far and the insights provided should assist teachers. The present study obtained some valuable results and surely can provide some enlightenment to EFL learning in Iran. However, there are still some uncertainties and limitations needing further research. Finally, it is hoped that the findings of this study provide further directions and guidelines for researchers and those interested in speaking skills with the aim of enhancing learning and supporting the needs and requirements of learners. It is also hoped that by integration of compensation strategies in oral skills, more opportunities are provided for all to benefit equally from learning and education.

For pedagogical purposes, the following implications can be offered. In order to develop the strategic competence of the students and in order to enhance learners' proficiency in the TL, EFL teachers should set an acceptable model for learners by attempting to speak in English most of the time and encourage learners to speak and discuss issues through English. This method will develop students' English input and reduce the chance of depending on L1-based compensation strategies (e.g. literal translation and code switching) or avoiding interaction. It also reduces anxiety level of learners and helps them build positive attitudes towards the English language. It also helps in promoting learners' self-esteem and motivation.

In order to aid students in learning the language, not about the language, and to make it a part of their linguistic proficiency, instructors should involve learners in real life interactive activities, and actual and contrived discussions. Moreover, language syllabi and programs should involve learners in problem solving activities. This, in turn, helps learners in overcoming their apprehension while interacting (i.e., shyness caused by anxiety and fear when interacting with others) and helps in developing learners' motivation and self-esteem.

It is highly recommendable that the greatest attention should be paid to the actual use of language and to conveying intended meaning, not to grammatical correctness. To assist learners in building strategic competence, communication should be focused on teaching English. Learners should also be instructed on accurate examples of communication strategies derived from learners' actual utterances by analyzing these instances and finding the CSs used. Teachers should also motivate learners to increase a goal of proficiency in English language rather than a goal of fulfilling a requirement because positive attitudes toward the TL would be appeared and more learners might be engaged in learning the language. Teaching achievement strategies and L2-based CSs are suggested since these CSs help to keep up interaction and to convey the message.

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### Authors

\***Alireza Karbalaee** holds a PhD in TEF and is a faculty member of Farhangian University, and Head of English Department in Kish International Branch, Islamic Azad University in Iran. He is the editor of different journals and has published 45 articles in the area of TEFL. His research interests lie in reading, listening, and vocabulary strategies, and discourse analysis.

\***Tania Negin Taji** received her MA in TEFL in Kish International Branch, Islamic Azad University in Iran. She is currently working as a teacher in different institutes in Shiraz, Iran.